

12/3/01

**to: Federal Communications Commission**

**re: MM Docket No. 01-235**

**Cross-Ownership of Broadcast Stations and Newspapers**

I oppose any attempt by FCC commissioners to weaken or eliminate the Newspaper/Broadcast cross-ownership rule.

There has been a marked difference in recent months between how newspapers and television broadcast news have covered the attacks on the World Trade Center and their aftermath. A greater diversity of viewpoints has been presented on newspaper editorial pages and web sites, than has been seen on the television news.

If newspapers were all owned by broadcast companies, is it likely this diversity would continue? If newspapers were all owned by broadcast companies, particularly in small, local news markets, is it likely that the newspaper editorial staffs would continue to be independent? Isn't it more likely that newspaper editorial staffs would be cut even further?

My own personal experience with the newspaper industry has confirmed my political belief that media consolidation is NOT in the public interest.

Here on the rural North Coast of Northern California, the local mainstream newspapers are now all owned by Media News Group. The list includes the Ukiah Daily Journal (the biggest paper in Mendocino County), the Lake County Record-Bee (the biggest paper in Lake County), the Eureka Times-Standard (the biggest paper in Humboldt County), the Willits News, the Fort Bragg Advocate News, and the Mendocino Beacon (after Media News Group bought the Mendocino and Fort Bragg papers nearly three years ago now, they shut down the Mendocino office entirely, and the Beacon is now put together entirely out of the Fort Bragg office -- surely this is not in the public interest of the residents of the town of Mendocino.)

When I told the editor of the Ukiah Daily Journal a couple of years ago that I was quitting my reporter's job, because I couldn't make it on \$8/hour, she told me I should consider my actions seriously, because it was Media News Group's plan to own every media outlet on the North Coast -- every newspaper, every radio station and every television station. "You have to consider your future," she said. At the time, I replied: "Well, isn't there a little thing called the FCC standing in the way of such monopoly?" And she told me MNG executive Dean Singleton had told his management staff that both Vice-President Gore and Gov. George W. Bush had assured Singleton personally that removing ownership caps and cross-media rules were on both of their agendas.

When I moved to Willits in 1992, the Willits News was still owned by a local family, and the county reporter on staff was making \$14.75/hour -- a rather good wage here, thanks to her eight years at the paper. When I worked as county reporter and interim editor at the Willits News after it was sold to Times Publishing, a small chain out of Pennsylvania, I made \$8/hour, raised to \$8.25 right before I left.

I then interviewed for a job at the Ukiah Daily Journal, then owned by Donrey Publishing, and I was shocked to discover they were offering reporters only \$7.50/hour. I took the job anyway, and enjoyed a successful stint at the paper, until I'd gotten so deeply in debt, using my credit cards to cover expenses, like automobile maintenance, that my wages didn't cover, that I had to quit.

Current employees of the Ukiah Daily Journal complain privately about how, under Media News Group, "everything is bottom line." Morale is low, and medical and other benefits offered under Media News Group ownership are said to be worse than ever.

Low wages and paltry benefits paid to newspaper staffs by national chains have affected editorial coverage enormously at the local papers. Local reporters are now much more likely to be young people from away -- young people with very little reporting experience and no knowledge of local history, issues, or personalities. These young people don't stay long -- they have no stake in our communities, and leave as soon as possible for better jobs somewhere else.

One controversial situation in Willits involves a shut-down chrome-plating factory, which has resulted in a toxic plume of ground-water under the site. Neighbors involved in a lawsuit against the City of Willits and the plant's current owners have "muddied the waters" by making unsupported claims regarding the activities at the plant, but there is no question that there was at least some illegal dumping. The City of Willits knows this; the state Water Board knows this; the federal EPA knows this; and former employees at the plant have testified in detail about illegal dumping. So, I was shocked to hear the current local reporter for the Willits News, who moved to town last year from Washington State, say she didn't know if there had been intentional illegal dumping. I asked the City of Willits attorney to provide this reporter with a copy of the deposition of the court case with the testimony of the ex-employees, and I can only hope the reporter read it.

When I was covering this toxic situation for the Ukiah daily, one issue was a clean-up scheme proposed by a "bio-remediator" from Texas, who wanted to pump molasses and lime sulphur into wells to convert the hazardous chrome to a less hazardous form. I called the local newspaper in another California town where this bio-remediation company had done a clean-up a few years ago to check on its long-term success. Unfortunately, when the local reporter at this paper called back, he said there was nobody working at the paper anymore who'd been there when this clean-up was done, so they couldn't tell me anything about the situation.

Two summers ago, a high-school junior put together the sports pages during school vacation for the Ukiah Daily Journal, because they couldn't find a sports reporter willing to take the job for such low wages. This same high-school junior (15? 16? years old), covered the editor's position at the Willits News for two weeks that same summer, and ended up putting out a front page with two inappropriate stories that offended local readers -- one should've been on the editorial page, and one probably shouldn't have been printed at all. But this high-school junior with no journalism experience or training didn't know any better - all he knew was how to work the page layout program.

The Willits News went without a county reporter for eight months this last year, again because they couldn't hire anybody for the low wages they offered. An occasional re-printed Ukiah Daily Journal story was the only coverage of county issues presented in the Willits News that whole time. If the Willits News was still separately owned, if they were still "competing" with the Ukiah paper and didn't have the option of reprinting the UDJ stories, would they have made more an effort to attract a reporter (maybe raised the wages a bit)? I can't say, but this seems to me a good example of how consolidation of media ownership specifically results in fewer editorial voices.

One other issue I'd like to point out: after Media News Group bought the Ukiah paper, they shut down the Ukiah pressroom and shifted all newspaper and side job printing to the Lake County plant. Not only did this result in loss of jobs (and loss of the only web printing press in Ukiah), it also mandated earlier editorial and production deadlines. The Ukiah Daily Journal has always been an "afternoon paper," but although you still can't find it in the racks first thing in the morning, the fact is, the newspaper is now put to bed the evening before publication, instead of early the same morning. Needless to say, this has affected the freshness and timeliness of the editorial product.

The twice-a-week Willits News is also now electronically transmitted and printed in Lake County. Again, this has meant earlier deadlines for editorial staff, and much less control of the look of the paper -- the editor no longer has the chance to take a look at the pages as they come off the press. One specific result: for the first time anyone can remember, the Wednesday issue after this November's Tuesday election had no mention of the local election results. The traditional Willits News practice of holding a spot on the front-page for the late-night election results was abandoned.

These issues may not seem very momentous in the grand scheme of things, but for local communities dependent on their local newspaper for news about what the Board of Supervisors or the school board or the planning commission is doing -- they are very important, indeed. There are, as yet, no Internet sites on the North Coast with local news other than the web sites maintained by the above-mentioned chain-owned newspapers. Radio news is fleeting, and is not available as an archive for the general public, as old newspapers are. There are several local radio stations with reporters that cover, at least briefly, the local decision-making bodies, but as the FCC is considering allowing multiple ownership of radio stations inside the same market, diversity of these voices is threatened, also.

Consolidation means fewer editorial voices, and loss of pay and benefits for editorial workers. It also means local reporters are less likely to develop much understanding of important local issues. This does not serve the public interest, as is clearly demonstrated here on the North Coast of California.

Thanks for this opportunity to comment.

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